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ABSTRACT

A telephone survey of a random sample of operators of mid-to large-size farms in Virginia was used to identify informational needs of the Virginia farm operator, to evaluate farmer perception of Virginia Cooperative Extension Service programs, and to gather data on the publications read and other media used by farmers. A total of 334 20-question surveys were completed, for a response rate of 56.7%. Many farmers surveyed (41.3%) were unsure of the type of information of greatest value to them in operating their farm or planning for the future. When asked to choose among selections on how Extension could best help them, 43% said by providing marketing information, 26% said through production information, and 21% said that financial information would help them. Farmers surveyed viewed the Extension Service as a valuable source of information. Extension was the most important source of production information for 41% of the farmers. Additional information sources were farm magazines, and other farmers. Considering the large number of respondents who had no strong opinion on how to solve their problems, it seems that there is a need for leadership, rather than reaction, from Extension. (JHZ)

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The Market for Extension Information in Virginia

by

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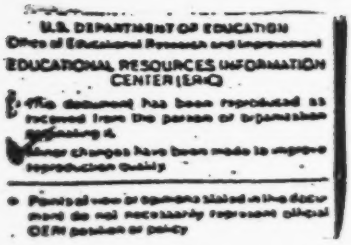

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The Market for Extension Information

in Virginia

Abstract

A telephone survey of a random sample of mid to large size farms in Virginia reveals some stated educational needs of farmers. Farmers view extension as an important source of production, marketing and financial information. Media habits of Virginia farmers are reported.

The Market for Extension Information in Virginia

Introduction and Situation

The Virginia Cooperative Extension Service serves the people of the state by providing practical information and the latest research findings through its various programs. In order to best serve the educational needs of people, Extension must stay attuned to those needs. The structure of agriculture has been in a state of change in Virginia for many years. Resources for farmers and for educators charged with the responsibility to help farmers are limited. In order to best utilize these limited resources the extension service is obligated to reevaluate the educational needs of farmers and to determine how best to reach those in need of and interested in education.

The objective of this study was to identify the informational needs of the Virginia farm operator and to evaluate farmer perception of extension programs. Additionally, the survey was designed to gather data on the type of publications read by farm operators and other media used by farmers.

This study provides a new starting point for extension program planning in Virginia. Information needs, delivery methods and the types of clientele target groups are suggested in the findings of this research.

Most of the approximately 50,000 farms in Virginia are small. Over 77 percent of all Virginia farms have annual sales of less than $20,000. Just 14.5 percent of Virginia farms have sales over $40,000.

Virginia is a state of diversity--in geography, climate, culture and agriculture. No one commodity or system of production dominates, yet many traditional commodities are important to state producers. This diversity creates challenges and opportunities for farmers and for those who work toward improving the agricultural sector. The many needs felt by farm families must be met within resource limits. This research attempts to accomodate both the needs of farmers and the ability of the Extension Service to address those needs.

Virginia Farmer Survey

Farmers contacted were selected from a random sample of 9,708 operators within the statistical data bank of the Virginia Crop Reporting Service. The data bank was constructed to include operations which are of commercial size units such as having more than 200 head of cattle, having more than 200 acres or growing more than 10 acres of tobacco. The intent was to survey the mid to large size farms. From the original data bank 589 names were selected and contacted.

Data were collected using a twenty question telephone survey

which was introduced to the farmer in a letter approximately two weeks prior to the call. There were 334 completed questionnaires for a response rate of 56.7 percent. Refusals totaled 5.8 percent; no longer farming accounted for 12.7 percent; 12.7 percent were not at home, even after three attempts; 7.7 percent had phones no longer in service; and 4.9 percent had died or were disabled--usually hard of hearing.

Open ended questions were post coded to categories and all data were evaluated using Statistical Analysis System. Testing of data was done with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences with a decision level of 0.05.

Of the farmers surveyed 91 percent were men, 49 percent operated farms with more than 179 acres and 32.3 percent estimated their gross annual sales in 1984 to be greater than $40,000. Five percent were less than 35 years of age, 34 percent were between 35 and 55, 38 percent were between 55 and 64 and 22 percent were 65 years old or older.

A wide spectrum of farm size by acres was represented in the survey sample. About 50 percent of the respondents operated farms of less than 180 acres. Thirty percent were from 180 to 500 acres, 13 percent from 500 to 1000 acres and about 6 percent operated farms with more than 1000 acres.

All types of farm operation were included in the sample, however since tobacco is an important state crop, the sample was constructed to include more responses from tobacco producers.

Ranked by responses, the commodities represented were: tobacco, beef cattle, hogs, soybeans, peanuts, small grains, dairy, corn for grain, vegetables and potatoes, sheep and poultry.

About 45 percent of the respondents had sales less than $20,000. One can see that with over three-fourths of Virginia farmers in this sales category, the small operator is underrepresented in this research. Not surprisingly about two-thirds of the farmers depended heavily on non-farm income to meet family needs. For one-third of the farmers, farm income as a percent of total family income was between 81 and 100 percent. About 16 percent of the respondents reported annual farm sales in excess of $100,000.

Perceived Needs of Farmers

Many farmers in the survey(41.3%) were unsure of the type of information of greatest value to them in operating their farm or planning for the future. When asked to choose among a number of selections on how Extension could best help them, 43 percent said by providing marketing information, 26 percent said through production information and 21 percent said that financial information would help them. Of 184 respondents who indicated a marketing need, 26 percent thought that market forecast of price, supply and demand was the type of marketing information needed. Table 1 shows their perceived needs for increasing

profitability. Respondents overwhelmingly thought that higher prices were needed to improve farm profits.

Table 2 shows the kinds of information judged to be of greatest value to the farmers surveyed. The Extension Service is a valuable source of information for the farmers surveyed. Farmers surveyed related how Extension can best help farmers achieve improved incomes by helping them increase crop yields, providing financial information and providing up-to-date marketing information.

Sources of Information

As may be expected, farmers use different sources when seeking information. Extension was the most important source of production information for 41 percent of the farmers surveyed. Farm magazines accounted for 18 percent, ASCS accounted for 7 percent and in 6 percent of the responses, other farmers were cited as the most important source of production information. Table 3 shows the sources of financial information for the farmers responding. Trade associations, the Extension Service and Banks are listed as the three most important sources of this type of information.

The perceived utility of extension information is shown in Table 4. Over three-fourths of the respondents viewed information from Extension as being useful for the farm operation. However nearly 14 percent felt that extension

information is either too specific, too broad, or out of date.

One of the important sources of information listed by the farmers responding to the survey was printed material. The Extension Service uses printed material in a variety of forms to reach groups of farmers. Knowing the reading habits of farmers will help identify those publications which are most often read by farmers and will suggest how the most farmers can be reached. Table 5 shows what farm publications are read by the respondents. Please note that this is not official circulation audit information, and because of the way in which the sample was constructed and the data collected, one must use the information with discretion. Without a doubt there are many means by which exension can reach farm audiences with educational material. Using information of this nature will help ensure that the most farmers possible are given the opportunity to learn the most up-to-date production, marketing and financial management techniques which can benefit the farm business and family.

Conclusions and Implications for Extension

The data from this survey suggest several things about the type of information wanted by farmers, the perceived role of Extension and the possible delivery methods that could be used to reach farmers.

Considering the large number of respondents who had no strong opinion on how to solve their problems, it seems that there is a need for leadership, rather than reaction from Extension. Combination of means by which Extension reaches farmers may be one strategy to follow. Farm Associations may be a useful auxiliary way of reaching the large commercial farmer. That farmers have defined media habits can be exploited by Extension educators. Extension media programs adapted to these patterns will have the greatest likelihood of reaching the farmer.

Table 1

Responses To Question Regarding What Aspect Of Your Farm Operation Needs To Be Improved In Order To Increase Profitability In Relation To 1984 Gross Cash Farm Receipts

Change Needed To Increase Farm Profits	1984 Gross Cash Farm Receipts							
	Under $20		$20 - 39		$40 and Above		Total	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Marketing	10	32.3	4	12.9	17	54.8	31	100.0
External Business Environment	30	35.2	19	22.4	36	42.4	85	100.0
Production Techniques	10	37.1	8	29.6	9	33.3	27	100.0
Increased Soil Fertility	31	67.4	7	15.2	8	17.4	46	100.0
Change in Farm Policy	6	28.6	5	23.8	10	47.6	21	100.0
Other	23	52.3	7	15.9	14	31.8	44	100.0
D/K	34	73.9	6	13.1	6	13.0	46	100.0
Business/Financial Management	6	31.6	5	26.3	6	42.1	19	100.0

NOTE: A chi-square test was used to test for a relationship between the two variables ("gross farm receipts" and the change needed to increase farm profitability). A "no response" to the question on gross farm receipts was treated as a missing value in the test. The response to the change needed to increase profits differed significantly by gross cash farm receipts ($P < .05$).

Table 2

Response to Question Regarding What Kinds of Information Are Of Greatest Value In Operating The Farm and Planning For the Future
(Question 7)
(Open-ended)

Information of Greatest Value	Total	Percent
Marketing Information	46	11.86
Future price	22	5.67
Financial Information	14	3.61
Pesticide and fertilizer information	27	6.96
Crop/Livestock Information	78	20.10
Weather	2	0.52
Cost Control	11	2.84
Purchasing Equipment	5	1.29
Farm policy	5	1.29
Other	11	2.84
Don't know/blank	138	35.57
Soil conservation/Improvement	18	4.64
World Trade	3	0.77
Future supply/Demand outlook	4	1.03
Management Information	4	1.03
Total	388	100.00

NOTE: This is an aggregate array of all responses. Many respondents had more than one answer. D/K blanks totaled 138/334 or 41.3% of sample.

Table 3

Response to Question Concerning The Source Of Information Most Often Used To Find Information On Farm Financial Management
(Question 8-2)
(Open-ended)

Source of Information Used	Total	Percent
Extension Service	57	15.3
ASCS	6	1.6
Farm Bureau	4	1.1
Trade Association	2	0.5
Bank	73	19.6
Farm Credit Association	8	2.2
FHA	13	3.5
Accountant/CPA	6	1.6
Production Credit Association	6	1.6
Consultant	1	0.3
Other farmers	8	2.2
Own experience, self	44	11.8
Farm magazines	21	5.6
Radio and TV	3	0.8
Newspapers	5	1.3
Other	1	0.3
No one or not applicable	56	15.1
Don't know	53	14.2
Co-Op	2	0.5
Virginia Department of Agriculture	1	0.3
Doans Report/Kipling Letter	1	0.3
Missing Response	1	0.3
All Responses	372	100.0

NOTE: Many respondents gave more than one source.

Table 4

Responses To Question Regarding The Perceived
Utility Of Extension Information
(Question 10)

Extension information is:	Total	Percent
Too broad and generalized	19	5.69
Too specific to be useful	3	0.90
Out of date	26	7.78
Useful for my farm	257	76.95
Don't know/blank	29	8.98
All respondents	334	100.00

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Table 5

Response to Question Concerning What Farm Publications Do You Read
(Question 14a)

Farm Publications Read	Total	Percent
None	36	10.8
One or more magazines	298	89.2
All Respondents	334	100.0
Farm Publications Named		
Cooperative Farmer	41	5.9
Dairyman	5	0.7
Drover Journal	9	1.3
Farm and Country	10	1.5
Farm Bureau News	41	5.9
Farm Journal	151	21.9
Hoard's Dairyman	11	1.6
Peanut Farmer	17	2.5
Peanut News	10	1.5
Progressive Farmer	209	30.3
South East Farm Press	32	4.6
Successful Farmer	35	5.1
Tobacco Farmer	23	3.3
Virginia Cattleman	12	1.7
Virginia Farmer	15	2.2
Lancaster Farmer	5	0.7
Doan's Report	5	0.7
Extension Service Publication	8	1.2
Other	51	7.4
Total Responses	690	100.0

NOTE: Many respondents read more than one magazine. The list below identifies publications named by 5 or more survey respondents. Magazines named by 4 or fewer respondents were classed as other. The entire magazine name list is on file at the Communications Office.

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